



## Where was the 1899 Govetts Leap banquet held?

*Keith Painter*

In February 1899 a walking track down the cliff from Breakfast Rock (a short distance below Govetts Leap Lookout at Blackheath) to the base of the Govetts Leap waterfall was opened with great fanfare.

Track construction had been carried out by Blackheath resident Tom Williams and his 20-year-old son Samuel. It took them eight months.

For the opening event a number of New South Wales and Victorian politicians and leading citizens travelled by train from Sydney. At Katoomba, the party's numbers were boosted by the members of the Katoomba Brass Band. On arrival at Blackheath they were joined by local residents.

At Govetts Leap Lookout the brass band went ahead of the party and stood on the small lookout just before Breakfast Rock. Here they played musical encouragement as the invited and paying guests made their way down the track.

The guests were on their way to a banquet luncheon to be held part-way down the new track.

Until recently it was thought that the site of the banquet was next to the ladder that descends through a hole in a rock ledge.

But my research has recently found a series of photos which show the location was another hundred metres further along the track.

Andy Macqueen in his 1997 book *Back from the Brink ~ Blue Gum Forest and the Grose Wilderness* included a photo of the banquet in which the main table can be seen under a canvas canopy. John Stuart Hawthorne, the Member for Leichhardt, can be seen standing and speaking. The credit for the photo is "Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW". See Figure 1.

I made an online search of the State Library of NSW (SLNSW) catalogue and found listings of several photos of the banquet. I then visited the library to view an album containing the photos, expecting to see the Macqueen photo.



*Figure 1. The "Macqueen photo": Mr Hawthorne making a speech at the banquet.*

State Library NSW PXA 2144/Box 112, No.18. Pic.Acc.4536.



*RIGHT: Figure 2. "Breakfast Rock Govetts Leap, Blackheath".*

Moberly, SLNSW, PXA 1629, photo 45.

However, it was not in the album. But there was a similar photo, plus a photo showing the banquet in a setting of gum trees, grass trees and large rocks, plus a photo of the guests passing the brass band at “Breakfast Rock” (Figure 2).

I believe the album to be the work of Rev. Edmund George Moberly (Figure 3), a Church of England minister, who lived in Blackheath for about five years in the late 1890s and early 1900s. Rev. Moberly had been involved with photography since the 1850s — one of the Moberly albums at SLNSW (there are four) has a photo of his father dated 1853, less than 15 years after the first successful photos.



Figure 3. “Rev. E. G. Moberly, age 84”, c1917. He died in 1920. SLNSW, PXA 2144/Box 28, No.71 Pic.Acc.479.



Figure 4. The Moberly photo: “The Minister for Works Mr Young declaring the Opening of the New Track”. Moberly, SLNSW, PXA 1629, photo 43.

Edmund’s wife Julia was the fourth daughter of William Beverley Suttor, a wellknown Bathurst district landowner (“Beverley Park”, Peel).

The Moberly photo (Figure 4) that is similar to the Macqueen photo is captioned “The Minister for Works Mr Young declaring the Opening of the New Track”.

Moberly’s photo was taken from almost the same position as the Macqueen photo. Mr Young is standing. Seated next to him is Joseph Cook, the local Member and Minister for Mines – later to be Prime Minister of Australia. The young lady next to Mr Cook is probably Mr Young’s daughter who is mentioned in the newspaper reports, but her first name is not given.



RIGHT: Figure 5. The Blue Mountains Historical Society photo: Mr Young opening the track. BMHS, Catalogue No. 2225 “Govetts Leap Pass opening”.

After returning home from the State Library in Sydney, I discovered on my bookshelf a copy of *Once Upon A Time In History: the Upper Blue Mountains* by Robyn Ridge. On the cover is another photo of the banquet. See Figure 5. This photo is from the collection of the Blue Mountains Historical Society (BMHS). The same picture can also be seen on the wall display in the National Parks Centre at Govetts Leap, Blackheath.

Here Mr Young is standing and speaking, but it is a different photo to the Moberly picture.

If you look at the Macqueen photo, a bearded man wearing a hat can be seen opposite Mr Hawthorne. Note that he has his arm bent. Now compare the same man in the BMHS photo. His arm is still bent but now Mr Young is speaking. And then look at him again in the Moberly photo. His arm is now straight. I believe this is the order in which the three similar photos were taken. I do not know who the photographers were for the Macqueen and BMHS photos.

### Where was the banquet location?

Reports of the preparations for the banquet show that “The arrangements are to have a banquet on a cleared spot along the path, which was cleared on Wednesday by a number of residents” (*The Mountaineer*, 24 Feb 1899, p3 c2, *Trove*#194839120). And “the luncheon ... shall take place about half way down the track on a ledge which has been widened for the purpose” (*Lithgow Mercury*, 24 Feb 1899, p4 c5, *Trove*#218632622).

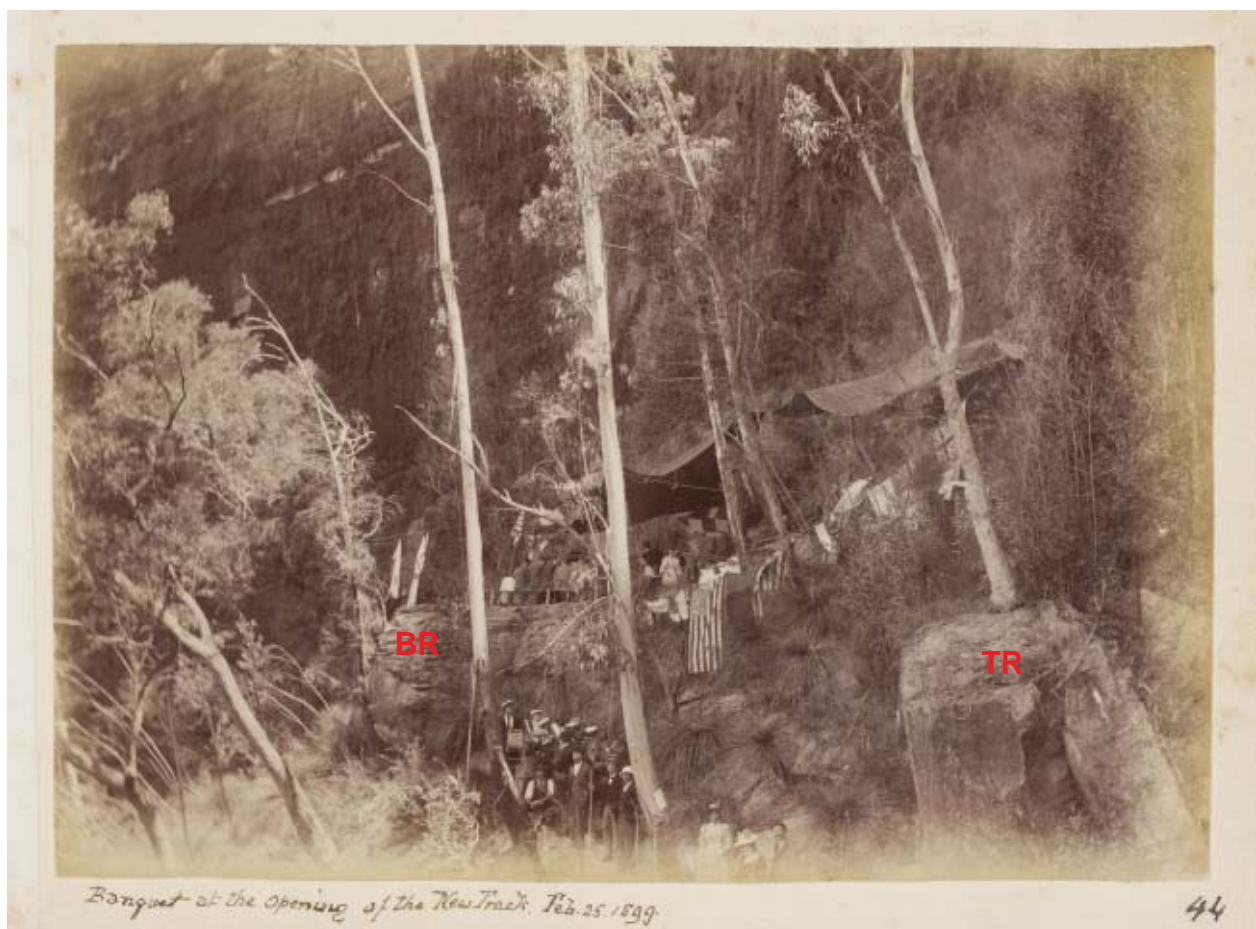


Figure 6. Moberly's banquet location photo: "Banquet at the Opening of the New Track. Feb. 25. 1899". Moberly, SLNSW, PXA 1629, photo 44.

One of Moberly's photos (Figure 6) shows the setting of the banquet was not far from the cliff and in an area with eucalypt trees, grass trees (*Xanthorrhoea*) and large rocks. An area that matches this can be found about a hundred yards beyond the ladder. (Today the ladder is steel, but the original was a steep 36-step timber staircase.)

The photo shows a canvas canopy spread above the tables. This was not only protection from the sun, but from the intermittent and frequent showers of water spray from the damp cliff above. A large array of flags were hung from ropes – including two Stars and Stripes and a white ensign. Guests were seated on benches erected next to the tables, of which there were at least three. The area was not only cleared but levelled. (Note: I have added the red letters, BR Banquet Rock, TR Tree Rock.)

The Katoomba Brass Band assembled below the banquet, as did at least six other men and two women. Perhaps this group had not paid for the luncheon or were waiting for space at the tables for a

second sitting. Next to them is a notice attached to a tree. When the photo is enlarged the letters “NOT” can be deciphered. I believe that the track to the base of the waterfall passed next to this tree where the group are standing and in front of the large rock at the right.



Figure 7. The banquet location today.  
Michael Small photo.

I have made three “expeditions” to the area with the assistance of experienced bushwalkers, researchers, and photographers. These resulted in a flat area being found above the track. In this location the level area appears to be unnatural.

The two rocks in the banquet setting photo can be identified today.

The photo in *Figure 7* shows me standing on the path (photographed in November 2019). To the right in the photo is the Tree Rock (TR) of Moberly’s photo. We believe that the same tree could still be the one growing on the rock. Because of its location the tree has had a difficult life and has not grown much. In the centre of the photo can be seen the Banquet Rock (BR). I have stood on the Banquet Rock and that is where the flat area is.

Today’s path takes a slightly different route above the Tree Rock instead of below it.



### About the Author

Keith Painter came to writing from a background in typesetting and printing, having worked in Australia, Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea. In 1994 he wrote and published his first *Pocket Pal* bushwalking guide. The series of Blue Mountains guides now numbers nine titles with combined sales of over 8,000 copies. Researching bush tracks led Keith into local history, writing *The Chert Bubble’s* two volumes on Mount Victoria’s 1920s chert industry, followed by *Hassans Walls ~ Prized and Pillaged* and *Padley of the Pedestal*. Last year one of his research lists on *Trove* grew into the book *Fifty Blue Mountains Openings*.



Figure 8. "New Track. from the top."  
Moberly, SLNSW, PXA 1629, photo 37.

There is also yet another Moberly photo showing the "New Track from the top" (Figure 8). It was probably taken from what is now named Barrow Lookout, about 100 metres beyond the top of Govetts Leap waterfall. It is likely that this photo was taken around the time of the track opening and banquet in February 1899.

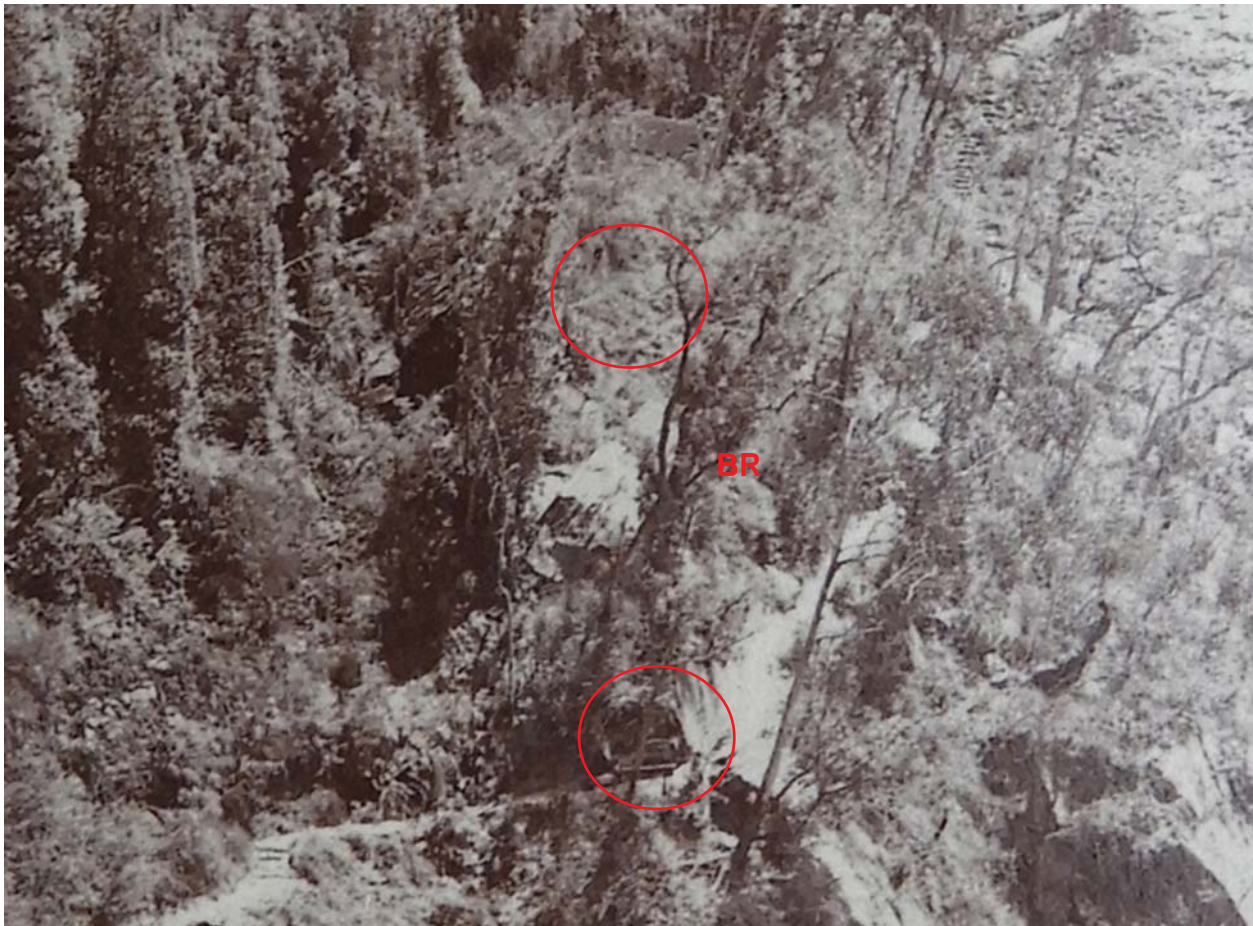


Figure 9. Enlargement of part of Figure 8, “New Track. from the top.”  
Moberly, SLNSW, PXA 1629, photo 37.

When this photo is enlarged (*Figure 9*) several things can be seen at the banquet site.

- There’s some sort of structure at the corner in the path. A site visit reveals that a large rock at this corner has a notch cut into it. Could the structure have been a barrier, a seat or a sign?
- There is an arrangement of “rectangles” at part of the banquet site. Could this be some of the seating benches from the banquet?
- The track can be seen snaking its way from the top left of the photo down to the bottom left.

### Conclusion:

Four photos of the banquet have been found.

Three are very similar.

One shows the location setting.

Another photo shows the area from above.

Rocks and trees shown in the photos enable the banquet site to be accurately pinpointed today.

The banquet was held on a site above the track about 100 metres from the base of the ladder.

### Notes:

1. The location of the Macqueen photo at the State Library proved elusive. Andy told me that the notation on the back of his copy was “SPF/Blue Mountains”. SPF stands for Small Picture File. But about ten years ago the contents of the Small Picture Files were relocated within the State Library and in some instances spread among other records. A visit to the library failed to locate the photo, even with the assistance of a very helpful librarian. However, several days later an online search of the library catalogue for “Hawthorne” found a possible item – which did not include the name Hawthorne! A phone call to the librarian who had previously assisted me led her to look in the suggested box and she took a photo with her phone-camera and emailed it to me. It is located at PXA 2144/Box 112, No.18. Pic.Acc.4536. There has been an error in the catalogue entry with the name of Hunt substituted for Hawthorne. The notation on the back of the photo clearly says “Hawthorne”.

2. SLNSW holds four albums, some diaries, several loose photos and a poem, which form a significant Moberly collection.